

# Russia's Machiavellian support for democracy

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>>> Russia has been labelled as an 'autocracy promoter' in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region. Colliding with EU and US democracy promotion efforts, Russia has supported anti-democratic regimes among the CIS countries. Yet it is also showing another, curious face as an avid democracy promoter.

Russia has contributed to the subversion of pro-Western regimes in Georgia and Ukraine and supported authoritarian Belarus for years. However, Russia does not only show its discontent with democratic leaders. Undemocratic ones do not gain its approval either, if their policies are not in line with Russian interests and demands.

Russia is not interested in bolstering a particular type of regime within its 'sphere of privileged interests' as an end in itself. Russian policies in the neighbourhood adopt democracy promotion rhetoric when it is deemed effective for geopolitical reasons. Therefore, Moscow's varying support for autocracy or democracy in a neighbouring country should be seen as a means of maintaining its influence over a weaker neighbour. Ironically, Russia may have recourse to democratisation as a tactic. This does not mean that Russia is heading towards democratisation; rather, it points to its ability to employ different tactics, from promoting autocracy to supporting democracy, depending on what best suits its interest. The democratisation agenda can become a pernicious weapon in the hands of an autocracy.

## BELARUS: BLAMING THE AUTOCRACY

According to the *Nations in Transit* 2010 report by Freedom House, the democracy indicator in Belarus has only slightly improved in recent

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The Kremlin calls for democracy beyond its borders as a means of maintaining its influence over a weaker neighbourhood
- Russia's toolbox is as varied as Western democracy aid: trade and aid embargoes, support of opposition and NGOs, and media campaigns against autocratic rulers
- To counter de-democratisation in Eastern Europe, the EU should maximise its democracy support

»»»»» years. Still, the civil society and independent media indicators have recently achieved their best scores this decade. Analysts of the European Union Institute for Security Studies state that 'the single most important factor causing change in Belarus' domestic politics and foreign policy has been a substantial shift in Russia's attitude towards the country'. Belarus' relations with Russia and the EU work against one another: the further Belarus is from Russia, the closer it is to the EU, thereby placing the EU in a better position to exert its soft power over Belarus.

Relations between Belarus and Russia have been in permanent decline since 2004, when Gazprom cut off Belarus' gas flow in an attempt to push Lukashenka to sell his country's transit monopoly Beltransgaz to Russia. Then, Lukashenka compared the attitude of the 'brotherly nation' to the Nazi activities in Belarus during World War II. In 2006, 2008 and 2010 energy wars between Russia and Belarus recurred, with oil and gas deliveries disrupted as Russia pressured Lukashenka for assets in Belarus' oil and gas industry. Since 2007 Lukashenka has infuriated Russia by holding up the customs union with Russia and Kazakhstan. Lukashenka has resisted a Russian takeover of Belarus' economic assets. The rupture in relations deepened in 2008 when Lukashenka refused to acknowledge South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two separatist regions of Georgia.

Just as the Eastern Partnership initiative was inaugurated by the EU in May 2009, a 'milk and meat' war broke out between Russia and Belarus, with Russia banning dairy imports from Belarus. Lukashenka, in turn, ignored the summit of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Instead he pursued a rapprochement with the EU. Not only did the European Union and Belarus launch a dialogue on human rights and attempt to increase trade and cooperation, but the visa ban for high level officials was suspended and Lukashenka made his first foreign visit to the Vatican and Italy. Similarly, the Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi was the first leader from a Western European country to pay an official visit to Belarus in a decade. Squabbles between Russia

and Belarus have been no less heated in 2010, starting with Lukashenka's sheltering of Kyrgyz leader Kurmanbek Bakiev in Minsk, much to Russia's chagrin, followed by the June gas war, when Russia cut gas supplies to Belarus as a reaction to its payment arrears.

The fact that Lukashenka will go to great lengths to out-manoeuvre Russia, including adopting a pro-Western stance, has deeply angered the Kremlin. When Lukashenka was regarded as a close ally of Moscow, Russia supported his regime in political, economic and military terms. But since he has sought to act independently of Moscow, Russia has aimed to weaken his regime. As the EU became softer towards Belarus, after its unsuccessful policy of isolating the authoritarian regime, Russia decided to make a personal contribution to democratisation in Belarus. Recent meetings between Russian politicians and the Belarusian opposition have put additional pressure on Lukashenka.

In addition, the civil campaign 'Tell the Truth', which began in Belarus on 25 February 2010 and aims to inform the public about political oppression in the country, is said to be at least partially financed by Russia. In July, the Russian channel NTV, which is controlled by Gazprom, aired two documentaries, 'Godfather' and 'Godfather-2', which depicted Lukashenka as an oppressive dictator and blamed him for the decade-old disappearance of members of the Belarusian opposition. The films were not aired in Belarus, but a quarter of Belarusians managed to watch them. In September, the Russian media campaign against Lukashenka in Belarus moved up a gear: films were aired showing human rights abuses and journalists and opposition leaders murdered by the Belarusian regime. As a result, hundreds of protesters took to the streets, demanding an investiga-

## **Russia calls for democratisation to boost its influence in the post-Soviet neighbourhood**

tion of the alleged presidential involvement in the political disappearances.

Moreover, Sergei Markov, State Duma deputy and member of the governing party United Russia, has acknowledged that Russia may pay attention for the first time to non-compliance with democratic norms at the upcoming Belarus presidential elections in December 2010. Nonetheless, Lukashenka's grasp of power still seems strong. He has ruled the country for 16 years and is likely to be re-elected for another five (independent polls indicate that he receives 45 per cent of popular support). One can only speculate as to how far Russia will go to weaken his regime. But the overall implications of Russia's policy are obvious: now that Lukashenka has been banished from the list of 'favourite sons', every attempt will be made to make him obey or eventually oust him from power, even if this requires an appeal to democracy.

#### **KYRGYZSTAN: OUSTING THE AUTOCRAT**

Another post-Soviet leader that Russia accused of falling short of democratic standards was Kurmanbek Bakiyev, an autocratic ruler who replaced his equally autocratic predecessor through the putsch known as the 'Tulip revolution' in 2005. Bakiyev infuriated Russia, among other things, by his refusal to close the US military base on Kyrgyz soil after accepting 450 million dollars of Russian aid. A few months before the April 2010 uprising, which overthrew Bakiyev's regime, Russian-language television and websites aired programmes which depicted Bakiyev as a criminal. Moreover, when these websites were blocked by the Kyrgyz government, complaints came from the Russian Foreign Ministry and renowned freedom of speech advocates such as the Committee to Protect Journalists and Freedom House.

Russia did not refrain from courting the Kyrgyz opposition figures either. Thus, in March 2010 Sergei Mironov, speaker of the upper chamber of the Russian Parliament, held a meeting with Roza Otunbayeva, the then opposition leader. She was

also invited to a conference of former Soviet political parties.

After the coup, Russian president Dmitri Medvedev was quick to denounce Bakiyev's regime as corrupt and clan-driven. He also demanded that the interim government hold free and fair elections as an essential pre-requisite for cooperation between Russia and Kyrgyzstan. Russian authorities continued the dialogue with the opposition: the day after the revolution the Russian prime minister talked to Roza Otunbayeva, while Sergei Mironov made a phone call to another opposition leader, Omurbek Tebebayev.

Russia used democracy rhetoric to fight against the autocratic regime of Bakiyev's family. The interim government was backed not only by Russia, but also by the EU, the US and the OSCE, which gave it legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. As a result, Kyrgyzstan has an interim leader who is loyal to both Russia and the US. When the parliamentary campaign started, Moscow received visits from Kyrgyz politicians looking for Russian support in the elections. With the aim of strengthening its influence over the future Kyrgyz government, the Kremlin has supported different Kyrgyz party leaders, including Felix Kulov, the ex prime minister who opted for a Kyrgyz-Russian confederation in 2007.

#### **GEORGIA: SUPPORTING THE OPPOSITION**

Russia seems to believe that pro-democratic tactics may work to oust another Russian foe – the Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili. Russia is unlikely to provoke a popular uprising in Georgia, given that the Saakashvili regime received the support of 56 per cent of voters at the local elections this spring. But its efforts may weaken Saakashvili's heavy-handed grip on power.

Dmitri Medvedev put it bluntly: better Russian-Georgian relations will only be feasible once Mikheil Saakashvili is out of power. This could soon become a reality: Saakashvili's second pres-



»»»»» identical term is over in 2013. However, the incumbent president is pushing to convert the country into a parliamentary republic at the end of his presidential term. The opposition say Saakashvili is preparing to cling onto power as a prime minister. In this case, Georgia may slide down the path of authoritarianism. But what was democratic for Russia when President Putin stayed in power in the position of prime minister, Moscow would not necessarily deem democratic for Georgia. If Saakashvili retires, part of the credit may go to Russia, especially taking into consideration that 59 per cent of the population is strongly against Georgia's current policy towards its northern neighbour.

Russian authorities are capitalising on the Georgian opposition's perceived need for negotiations with Russia. Both of the opposition leaders who have been invited to Moscow, Zurab Noghaideli and Nino Burjanadze, have justified their visits on the grounds that good relations with Russia are indispensable for the sake of continued dialogue with the international community. Moreover, as Western aid to Georgia has decreased, Russia wants to portray itself as a critical partner in times of poor economic performance. A parallel can be drawn with Belarus, where Russia has threatened to close the Druzhba oil pipeline, which would seriously jeopardise Belarusian revenues from oil trade and Lukashenka's welfare state.

## CONCLUSION

As *The New York Times* journalist Andrew Kramer observes, Russian tactics eerily resemble those of the West during the colour revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, when the West openly supported opposition and strongly encouraged free media. Democratic procedures can come in handy if they are likely to change unfriendly governments into friendly and accommodating ones. This happened in Ukraine in 2006 and 2010, when a Russia-friendly political party came to power in the course of democratic elections; and it may happen in Moldova in 2010, where Russia

will try to use democratic procedures to get a pro-Russian government back into power.

Russia's democracy promotion toolbox varies, just as Western aid to democracy does. Russia alternately withdraws financial aid; imposes trade sanctions; supports opposition or pro-democracy NGOs; launches a media campaign against authoritarian rulers; and calls for democratic elections.

It would be naïve to believe that Russia pursues democratisation in the region as an end in itself. The pattern of Russia's strategy towards its neighbourhood is clear: the West's democratisation discourse and agenda are deployed in order to change leaders that are strong but disloyal to Russia, and thereby keep Russia's neighbours weak. The means Russia uses to change ruling elites or their behaviour are not aimed at democratising their respective countries, but rather at establishing a Russia-dependent government. The Kremlin tries to make sure that competition among domestic leaders is as fierce as possible, thus disuniting the elites and securing an easy grip on power and assets for itself. In addition, Russia is cast in a favourable light by being seen to cooperate with the West, in line with the US reset and modernisation agenda with the EU. Acknowledgement of this provides several lessons to vulnerable Russian targets as well as Western democracy promoters.

First and foremost, Ukraine and Georgia are the ultimate battlefields. If they take Russia's bait and give up democratic standards, not only will they alienate themselves from the West, but they will also hand to Russia the title of the most influential player in the region. This is where Western democracy promoters should work harder than ever, preventing the countries from an undemocratic slide.

Inconsistency in Western democracy promotion policies opens up an opportunity for Russia to use democracy discourse for strategic purposes. While the means may be the same, the end results often differ: Russia will forgive the unde-

mocratic tendencies of a new leader loyal to Russia, as long as the benefits outweigh the costs.

Such democracy promotion by Russia can also be viewed as part of Russia's strategy of redefining the notion of democracy. Both at home and abroad, Russia does not deny the imperative of democracy as such. Rather, it insists on its own interpretation of democracy and selectively criticises the democratic credentials of others, mainly in order to divert external criticism away from itself or to put pressure on unfriendly political regimes.

At the very least, the West should not abandon the Eastern European region. The self-indulgent policies of elites do not reflect the will of the people. Given the authoritarian trend in the EU neighbourhood, the EU should assert its presence and support for democracy more than ever. However, rather than picking individual leaders, the West should promote democratic institutions including elections, the rule of law and civil education, and denounce a lack of democratic standards. If anything, a Western retreat would mean that all the resources and efforts spent on democratising the region to date have been in vain.

Russia does have a stance on democracy promotion, which should by no means be discounted by democracy promotion actors. Lack of assertiveness by the West clears the ground for Russia to turn democratisation into a tool to extend its influence in the region. In such a scenario, the legitimacy of Russia's influence would be hard to contest.

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